

WYCOMBE Wanderers embark on the FA Trophy trail tomorrow (Saturday) when they travel to Bridgend in the first round of this year's competition

In the four years they have competed in the Trophy, lady luck has seldom smiled on the Blues. This will be their fifth consecutive away tie and they have never been drawn at Loakes Park.

Tomorrow's game stands as one of the most important for Wanderers who need to obtain the right result to maintain interest in the club over the coming months. With Enfield 14 points clear at the top of the Isthmian League, only a supreme optimist would back Wycombe for the title and after their exit at the first attempt at Minehead in the FA Cup, the Blues need a prolonged run in the Trophy.

Standing in their way are Bridgend, who have already disposed of three clubs in the qualifying rounds. A small club compared with Wycombe, they are enjoying a successful season in Division One North of the Southern League where they are placed third. They have lost only four of their 17 matches.

It is difficult to judge the standard of the opposition but Wanderers will remember the difficulty they had at Witney Town in a pre-season friendly which they lost 1-0. Witney are currently top of the Division.

As always, Wycombe have watched the opposition. Manager John Reardon saw them crash 4-0 at home to Barry Town — their worst result of the season — while coach Brian Hall was at Dun-

stable on Saturday when Bridgend won 3-0.

SLOPING PITCH

Although respecting the Welsh club's playing ability, John is more concerned with the pitch and the weather. He told me this week: "The pitch slopes from end to end and is similar to Maidenhead's, only smaller. After the recent weather the going is bound to be heavy and mud can be a great leveller."

Of the players, the manager felt Bridgend's strength was in midfield but he admits he caught the side on an off day against Barry.

Overall, however, John was optimistic. "This is a big game for us and whatever the conditions we have the confidence to succeed."



JOHN PRIESTLEY
... improved form

Confidence is something Wanderers will not be short of. Recent league victories at Slough and Tooting — both in heavy conditions — should stand them in good stead. Bridgend, incidentally, sent their manager to Sandy Lane to see the Blues win 2-1. He must have been impressed, especially with the form of the back four. There has also been a marked improvement in midfield recently with the return of John Priestley who revels in mud.

After Saturday's win, Wycombe are expected to keep the same side and have only one injury problem in Dylan Evans, who is still having treatment for a back injury.

BY TRAIN

The team, and nearly 400 supporters, travel down by train in the morning. Bridgend's ground is only a short walk from the station. There is a small stand accommodating about 200 people.

For Bridgend, this match represents one of their biggest games and they are expecting the best attendance of the season. Their success this season in league and cup competitions has lifted their confidence and in Clive Charles, full-back, they have a player who has met Wycombe before. He was in the Cardiff side that beat the Blues 1-0 at Ninian Park two seasons ago in the F.A. Cup.

Wycombe's lone victory in the Trophy came last year when they won at Barnet. In the next round, however, they were ousted 2-1 at Runcorn of the Northern Premier League. In previous years they have gone out at Ilford and Slough Town.

There is a feeling at the club that this might be their year for a run in the competition and although Bridgend will undoubtedly prove a tough hurdle to clear, Wycombe's extra class should see them through.

BRIDGEND KEEPING THE FLAG FLYING

BRIDGEND TOWN, the team tucked away in the heart of one of the biggest rugby strongholds in Wales, keeps the soccer flag flying with a vengeance and over a quarter of a century has a fine record.

This season the club has undergone a major transformation with a new six-man board of directors taking control during the summer and winning Southern League status at the first time of asking.

And ambitious Bridgend, headed by enthusiastic chairman, Chris Smart, a well-known South Wales journalist, broadcaster and businessman, have made a remarkable start to their Southern League careers.

At the moment they are in third place in Division One (North) with 23 points from 17 games. They have scored 26 league goals this season and conceded 20 — five wins from the last six matches is a good indication of the current confidence.

To get to the first round proper of the competition,

Bridgend have beaten Welsh League club, Ferndale 2-0 at home, Paulton Rovers 3-2 away, and Western League high-flyers, Bideford 2-0 also away.

Before being elected to the Southern League, Bridgend had just one team — in the premier division of the Welsh League and during the past decade they have twice been champions and have never been out of the top four clubs.

They were runners-up last season for the second season running. Now, although in the Southern League, Bridgend still have a side in the Welsh League — that team is made up mainly of young players being blooded for the future.

REMARKABLE

The club's away form in the League has been remarkable this term. From eight matches they have five wins, one draw and two defeats, while at home in nine matches, they have won five

times, drawn twice and lost twice.

Bridgend, although not by any means one of the most glamorous sides in the non-league world, believe that professionalism is the way ahead — and on that basis they develop their thoughts and policies.

"I firmly believe that from this level up there has to be very real professionalism," says chairman Smart.

The manager of Bridgend at the moment is 36-year-old Lyn Jones, formerly with Arsenal and then Bristol Rovers. This is his first season at Coychurch Road.

Said Jones: "Wycombe are renowned as one of Britain's top non-league sides, but I am confident we will give them a run for their money."

Bridgend's top scorer this season is 22-year-old Graham Bennett, who has netted 12 times while the player in form at the moment is goalkeeper, David Annetts. He hasn't let in a goal in the last three matches.

How they stand

WYCOMBE'S win at Tooting on Saturday gives them a four point lead over third placed Leatherhead in the Isthmian League. In most national newspapers, Leatherhead's result was given as a 2-0 home defeat by Boreham Wood. In fact, Leatherhead won 1-0.

So far this season nine clubs have exceeded the eight point penalty point limit in the Premier Division. Wycombe and Sutton have the best disciplinary records with only one booking (one point) conceded.

ISTHMIAN LEAGUE PREMIER DIVISION (Up to & inc 10/1/78)

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Enfield	26	21	4	1	82	16	87
Wycombe	26	17	2	7	46	26	53
Leatherhead	26	14	7	5	46	23	49
Hitchin	26	13	7	6	43	30	46
Tooting	27	12	7	8	38	33	43
Carshalton	28	12	6	8	44	36	42
Dagenham	26	12	5	9	47	39	41
Croydon	26	11	6	9	38	33	39
Haves	27	11	6	10	33	36	39
Sutton	24	11	5	8	32	34	38
Staines	24	10	7	7	30	33	37
Hendon	27	10	6	11	36	37	36
Barking	27	10	4	13	43	45	34
Walthamstow	22	8	7	7	34	34	31
Boreham	25	8	6	11	33	42	30
Slough	26	8	5	13	34	45	29
Kingstonian	26	5	7	14	27	39	22
Woking	22	6	3	13	34	41	21
Leytonstone	27	3	11	13	28	45	20
Southall	25	4	8	13	26	46	20
Tilbury	22	4	7	11	31	41	19
Stortford	26	3	6	17	26	68	15

SOUTHERN LEAGUE DIVISION ONE (NORTH) (up to & inc 9/1/78)

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Witney	20	10	8	2	28	15	28
Enderby	18	10	3	5	31	20	23
Bridgend	17	10	3	4	26	20	23
Burton	17	10	2	5	24	15	22
Kings Lynn	19	8	6	5	33	25	22
Barry	15	8	5	2	29	16	21
Cambridge	15	7	6	2	20	10	20
Bromsgrove	19	7	6	6	25	20	20
Wellingboro'	19	7	5	7	24	17	19
Banbury	19	8	3	8	28	27	19
Kidderminster	19	6	7	18	17	18	19
Northey	14	7	3	4	34	20	17
Stourbridge	18	4	9	5	21	22	17
Corby	17	4	8	5	17	20	16
Gloucester	21	7	2	12	33	41	16
Bedworth	19	4	8	7	19	32	16
Dunstable	20	4	6	10	22	34	14
Milton K	22	4	6	12	19	40	14
Tamworth	20	4	5	11	12	30	13
Oswestry	20	3	4	13	14	36	10

Replay date

SHOULD tomorrow's F.A. Trophy tie at Bridgend finish drawn, the teams will replay at Loakes Park on Tuesday night, kick off 7.30 p.m.